
Laura Bellini
The Price of One Look
One hidden truth can change the value of everything

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INTRO

The first time I saw Borys Sowa, I was trying to prove that a painting worth several hundred thousand zlotys wasn't worth even half that amount.

He stood in the doorway of a gallery in Wrocław, a wooden toolbox tucked beneath his arm, his hair wet and the expression of a man who had walked into the wrong place but had no intention of apologizing for it. I was kneeling in front of a nineteenth-century landscape, shining a flashlight along its lower edge. I wore black trousers, a white shirt, and gloves that cost less than the coffee served at exhibition openings. I preferred it that way. In my profession, the less impressive a person looked, the more likely someone was to finally listen to what they had to say.

"The gallery is closed," I said without looking up.

"I noticed. I had to ring the bell three times."

"And yet you got in."

"Zofia gave me a key."

That was enough to make me turn around more sharply than I'd intended.

Zofia Maj, the gallery's owner, was a woman of impeccable taste and a troubling tendency to make decisions on other people's behalf. Three days earlier, she'd assured me that no one would touch the painting until my appraisal was complete. I needed just two weeks to finalize the documentation, issue my assessment, and receive the payment that would finally allow me to rent a place of my own. Not an office shared with a law firm, where conversations about the authenticity of artworks were

constantly interrupted by the hum of a paper shredder. A real studio, with northern light, an examination table, and a door I could close without asking anyone's permission.

The man set his toolbox beside the wall and looked at the painting.

"It shouldn't be standing like that."

"Excuse me?"

"It's leaning at the wrong angle. The bottom rail of the frame is bearing too much weight."

I rose slowly.

"And you are?"

"Borys Sowa. Framing and frame restoration."

He was thirty-eight, as I learned later, although even then I noticed that particular mixture of maturity and defiance in his face. He was tall, wearing a dark sweater with the sleeves rolled up. A pale scar marked one wrist, and there was a trace of gold paint on his thumb. He didn't look like someone who had come to impress anyone.

And that was precisely why I paid him more attention than I should have.

"Anita Rojek," I introduced myself. "Art appraiser. The painting will remain in this position until I've finished examining it."

"In that case, would you allow me to put a wedge underneath?"

"I haven't authorized any work."

"I'm not proposing any work. I'm suggesting we prevent the frame from cracking before you've finished examining it."

His voice was calm. He didn't raise it or try to embarrass me. He merely pointed to a small gap near the left corner, one I hadn't noticed before. When I looked more closely, I realized he was right.

I didn't like moments like that.

I liked men who could be right without displaying the slightest trace of satisfaction even less.

"Show me the wedge," I said.

He took it out of his toolbox and handed it to me instead of approaching the painting himself. That small gesture surprised me more than his observation. I knew plenty of specialists who treated other people's workplaces as their own territory. Borys apparently understood the difference between offering help and taking control.

For a while, we worked in silence. He held the wooden support steady while I adjusted the frame's position. The gallery smelled of floor polish, old paper, and rain drifting through a window that hadn't been fully closed. Trams passed outside, their lights cutting across the wet cobblestones. When I straightened up for the second time, Borys was standing close enough for me to catch the faint scent of wood and soap on his sweater.

"Thank you," I said.

"That sounded painful."

"Let's not make a habit of it."

He smiled for the first time then. Not broadly, not seductively. Just one corner of his mouth, as though he appreciated an answer he hadn't expected.

"I take it your opinion of the painting isn't particularly favorable."

"I take it you understand I'm bound by confidentiality."

"That seems sensible."

"Usually."

"And today?"

Instead of answering, I turned back toward the landscape.

It depicted a bend in the Oder River at dawn, with a solitary boat near the bank and low buildings in the distance. The painting was beautiful, although beauty was no proof of authenticity. The signature was attributed to a well-known painter from the late nineteenth century, but the provenance documentation contained a troubling gap. Twenty-seven years during which the canvas had supposedly remained in a private collection, without a photograph, a receipt, or even a mention in correspondence.

One reliable piece of information would have been enough to settle the matter.

Zofia expected a favorable appraisal before the planned sale.

I expected facts.

"The frame isn't original," Borys said suddenly.

I looked at him.

"What makes you say that?"

"The proportions of the moulding. The way the corners are joined. And the gilding."

"The frame could have been replaced many times."

"Of course."

He studied the lower rail with an intensity that transformed his face. The smile disappeared, and with it his

easy manner. For a moment, he looked as though he had recognized something he would rather not have seen.

"Have you worked on this frame before?" I asked.

He didn't answer immediately.

"On similar frames."

"That's not an answer to my question."

"I know."

Our eyes met above the painting's upper edge. His were gray, surprisingly pale in the gallery's subdued light. He watched me attentively, without attempting to dominate the conversation, but with no intention of withdrawing what he'd just said. I felt irritated because his silence was deliberate. Yet there was something about the way he allowed me to notice it that stirred an uncomfortable curiosity.

A tram bell sounded from the street.

"Zofia asked me to prepare the frame for display," he finally explained. "I didn't know the appraisal was still underway."

"All the more reason you shouldn't change anything."

"I agree."

I hadn't expected that either.

I took out my phone and opened a message from the gallery owner. She'd sent it less than an hour earlier.

Anita, the framer will come tomorrow morning. Please allow him to assess the condition of the frame. I want the painting prepared for sale as efficiently as possible.

Tomorrow morning.

I glanced at my watch. It was seven forty in the evening.

"You're a little early."

"Zofia called just as I was finishing work. She said it was urgent."

"Everything is urgent to her."

"And to you?"

The simplicity of the question caught me off guard. I could have answered that it was the deadline for my report, my professional responsibility, or the documentation. Instead, for a fraction of a second, I thought about the empty premises on Łaciarska Street that I'd viewed that morning. About the light falling across the tall windows. About the lease waiting to be signed and the deposit I didn't want to finance with another loan.

"The truth," I said at last. "Even if it turns out to be inconvenient."

Borys stopped smiling.

A telephone rang somewhere in the corridor. Neither of us moved.

"In that case," he said more quietly, "you should examine the back of the frame before anyone takes it apart."

"Why?"

He looked at the painting, then at me. I noticed the tension in the hand resting on his toolbox. He didn't look like a man who had just come up with an idea. He looked more like someone who had been postponing an inevitable conversation for some time.

"Because sometimes the most important information is hidden where nobody wants to look."

I should have asked him immediately what, exactly, he meant. I should have written down his words, requested an explanation, and ended the meeting according to procedure. Instead, I found myself looking at a man who, in the space of fifteen minutes, had managed to challenge my findings and awaken an interest for which I had made no room in my carefully ordered life.

"Will you help me turn it around?" I asked.

Borys hesitated.

"If we do this now, you might see something you won't be able to leave out of your report."

"That's exactly what I'm being paid for."

He nodded, but his expression remained serious.

When he stepped closer, our shoulders almost touched. He neither pulled away abruptly nor took advantage of the closeness. He waited until I showed him where to grip the frame.

And for the first time in a very long while, I wasn't sure what I wanted to discover more: the truth hidden behind the painting, or the reason Borys Sowa was so afraid I might see it.

Chapter 1 - What Cannot Be Seen

Turning an old painting over required more trust than I was prepared to place in a man I'd met barely fifteen minutes earlier.

It wasn't about the weight. The landscape wasn't among the largest works I'd handled, although its frame was substantial and alarmingly unstable in places. The problem was that Borys Sowa knew more about it than I did, and I had no idea how much of that knowledge he intended to reveal.

"Hold the right corner, please," I said. "Not the bottom rail. I don't want to put any additional stress on the cracked section."

"I know."

"Good. I like people who understand instructions."

"And I like people who don't give them unnecessarily."

I looked at him over the frame.

"We're going to have a difficult working relationship."

"We haven't even established whether we're going to work together."

He was right, which was beginning to become an irritating pattern.

We moved the painting onto a table I'd prepared earlier, its surface covered with soft fabric. Borys moved carefully, without rushing, with the concentration of someone accustomed to working with things that couldn't simply be replaced. I didn't have to correct his grip or remind him to protect the gilding. At one point, our hands were positioned on opposite sides of the same wooden rail. Moving our

fingers just a few centimeters would have been enough for them to touch.

I didn't do it.

Neither did he.

Once the painting lay facedown on the table, I switched on an additional lamp. Old canvas, wooden stretcher, small traces of previous repairs. Nothing sensational. At least not at first glance.

"What exactly did you want to show me?" I asked.

Borys pointed to two small holes near the frame's inner edge.

"These marks don't match the current mounting. Someone used a different system before."

I leaned closer.

"That could have happened during one of the restorations."

"It could."

"Do you make a habit of answering in single words?"

"When one is enough."

I angled the light more sharply. The wood bore traces of an earlier fitting, and a fragment of darker finish remained beside one of the holes. I took photographs, positioning a measuring scale alongside them. It wasn't evidence of forgery, or even proof of anything improper, but it suggested that the frame's history was more complicated than the documentation indicated.

"Zofia claims the frame has been with the painting since at least the eighties," I said.

"Does she claim that, or does she have documents to prove it?"

I looked up.

"You know the difference?"

"Very well."

This time, I was the one who fell silent.

My folder contained a copy of an old photograph showing the landscape hanging on the wall of a private apartment. The image was blurry, but the frame's profile looked different. Until now, I'd assumed the camera angle was responsible. I had to consider another possibility.

I took out the photograph and placed it beside the painting.

Borys didn't pick it up without permission. He merely leaned forward for a better look at the details.

"Where did this come from?"

"The owner's archive."

"Is it dated?"

"Someone wrote 1987 on the back."

"By hand?"

"Yes."

"Whose handwriting?"

I studied him with growing interest.

"I'm supposed to be the one asking questions."

"I'm not stopping you."

I smiled despite myself, then immediately turned my attention back to the photograph.

"The person who wrote the date hasn't been identified."

"Then I wouldn't treat it as reliable."

"I don't."

"Good."

I couldn't decide whether his matter-of-fact attitude irritated me more than his complete lack of interest in showing off his knowledge. Most specialists invited to examine expensive works of art enjoyed listening to themselves speak. Borys only talked when he considered it necessary. He spent the rest of the time observing.

My phone rang.

Zofia Maj's name appeared on the screen.

"Good evening, Anita. Is everything all right?" she asked before I could say anything.

"That depends on what we consider all right. Mr. Sowa is already here."

"Excellent. I was just about to let you know he managed to come earlier."

"Advance notice is considerably less useful after the event."

Zofia sighed.

"Let's not start. Borys is the best frame specialist I know."

"I'm not questioning his competence. I'm questioning the decision to change our arrangements without consulting me."

There was a brief silence at the other end.

"We need that painting ready for presentation next week."

I straightened.

"We discussed a tentative date. I haven't confirmed its authenticity or provenance."

"I know, darling."

I hated it when she called me darling just before attempting to persuade me to do something.

"Then let's agree that no alterations will be made until I've finished my examination."

"Borys needs to assess the scope of the work."

"He can assess it. He cannot begin."

"I really want you two to get along."

"And I want my assessment to remain independent."

Zofia ended the conversation by assuring me that we'd sort everything out in the morning. I knew that tone. It meant she expected me to reconsider my position after a good night's sleep.

I put down my phone.

"Did you hear that?"

"It was difficult not to."

"Then tell me plainly what you need."

Borys folded his arms.

"Access to the frame. Permission to document its condition. And the assurance that no one will expect me to restore something that ought to be examined first."

"On that point, we agree."

"There's one more condition."

I sighed.

"Of course there is."

"I want to be present during any examination that involves removing the mounting components. Not because I doubt your abilities. Because I don't want to be held responsible for damage that occurs when I'm not there."

I studied him carefully.

"And what if I decide your presence could compromise the independence of my examination?"

"Then hire another framer. I won't work under conditions that make me a convenient scapegoat."

It didn't sound like a threat. More like a boundary established after an earlier, unpleasant experience.

For a moment, I recognized something familiar in him.

I, too, knew the price of professional responsibility when someone else controlled the circumstances.

"I'll accept that condition with one reservation," I said. "We document our findings separately. You're responsible for assessing the frame; I'm responsible for the painting and its history. If discrepancies arise, we don't conceal them from the client."

Borys looked at me for a long moment.

"Agreed."

I held out my hand.

He took it firmly, but without an ostentatious squeeze. His palm was warm and slightly rough. I noticed that as clearly as I noticed he didn't prolong the contact by even a second.

"Anita," I said. "If we're going to work together, we can dispense with all this formality."

"Borys."

"I already know that much."

"Then you're starting with an advantage."

I didn't have time to respond because he pointed to a spot near the right corner.

"Look here."

Under the magnifying glass, I noticed a shallow indentation with a regular shape. Someone had removed a small section of the wooden surface, probably during an earlier repair. The edges weren't fresh, but they were considerably lighter than the surrounding wood.

"There might have been a label there," I said.

"Or a workshop number."

"We could try to identify whatever remains."

"We could. Without disturbing the surface."

Borys reached for the lamp, and I took another series of photographs. We worked for almost an hour, comparing the marks with the documentation I'd prepared earlier. At one point, we discovered that two metal fasteners differed slightly from the others. Borys recognized an older method of attaching them, but he didn't attempt to assign a date without additional evidence.

I liked that.

Not his face, although it was difficult to ignore his strong features and the way his forehead creased when he concentrated. What I liked was his ability to say he didn't know. He didn't treat uncertainty as a personal failing.

At nine o'clock, I switched off the lamp.

"That's enough for today."

"I agree."

"Again?"

"Don't get used to it."

I smiled as I packed my camera into its bag.

Borys secured the frame and then checked the positioning of the supports. He did it without rushing, although I could see he was tired. Only when he'd finished did he take out his phone and check his messages.

"Something urgent?" I asked.

"The workshop. I've got a large order being collected tomorrow."

"Large?"

"For a hotel. A dozen or so frames. The deadline was reasonable until someone decided it ought to be earlier."

"That sounds familiar."

He put his phone away.

"Are you working to a tight deadline too?"

I hesitated.

I didn't tell strangers about my plans. Especially men whose presence could complicate my professional life.

"I have other commitments," I answered.

"I understand."

He didn't press.

And that was precisely what made me want to tell him more, just for a moment.

Instead, I closed my folder.

"We're meeting Zofia tomorrow at nine. I'll prepare a list of questions that need clarification."

"I'll be there."

"On time?"

"I'll arrive eight minutes early. That way you'll have time to refuse to let me in."

I laughed. Properly, without trying to control my reaction.

Borys looked at me with something that might have been satisfaction, but he didn't comment. He took his jacket from the stand and headed toward the door.

I stopped him before he left.

"Borys?"

He turned.

"Yes?"

"When you first saw that painting, I had the impression you recognized something."

The silence that followed was different from the earlier ones. It was no longer part of a professional deliberation.

"I recognized the type of frame," he answered.

"I asked about the painting."

He looked at the landscape standing against the wall.

"I've seen a similar framing arrangement before. I need to check whether I remember correctly."

"Where?"

"In some old workshop records."

"From your workshop?"

"Among others."

He didn't look away. Nevertheless, I had the impression that he was weighing every successive word more carefully than the situation warranted.

"If you find anything relevant, I need that information for my report," I said.

"I know."

"That's not an answer."

"For now, it's the only honest one."

I didn't like that sentence. Honesty that left so much room for omission was a suspicious concept as far as I was concerned.

After he left, I remained beside the painting for several more minutes. I studied the bend in the river, the little boat, and the pale line of the sky. I'd always believed I could separate what I actually saw from what I wanted to see.

That evening, I was no longer so certain.

At home, I opened the documentation on my laptop. I entered my observations concerning the frame, added the photographs, and noted the need to verify its history. Then I opened a message from the estate agent.

Ms. Rojek, the owner of the premises has agreed to wait until Friday before making a decision. After that, we'll return to the other interested parties.

Friday was three days away.

I looked at the lease I'd printed that morning. Then at the appraisal file on which a significant portion of my immediate income depended.

I could speed up the assessment. I could decide the existing documents were sufficient. I could do what Zofia had expected from the beginning.

But I hadn't spent eleven years building my professional reputation just to sign my name to something I couldn't defend.

I opened a new message.

Zofia, until the history of the frame has been clarified, I cannot confirm the painting's date or the continuity of its provenance. Tomorrow's meeting should take place before a date is set for the sale.

I sent it before I could change my mind.

A moment later, my phone vibrated.

It wasn't a reply from Zofia.

An unknown number.

It's Borys. I found an old catalogue of frame mouldings. One detail might be significant. I'll bring it tomorrow. And don't worry, I have no intention of touching the painting without your permission.

I read the message twice.

Then, to my own astonishment, I replied:

Good. You can bring coffee while you're at it. Since you're planning to arrive eight minutes early.

The answer came almost immediately.

How do you take it?

I stared at the screen for a moment.

He hadn't asked whether I wanted coffee. He'd asked how I took it.

A small distinction that my cautious nature ought to have ignored.

Double espresso. No sugar.

I'll remember.

I put the phone on my desk.

Outside, Wrocław glittered after the rain. My apartment was quiet, and on the table lay documents concerning a future I intended to arrange entirely on my own terms.

I didn't yet know what Borys Sowa was hiding behind his calm exterior.

I only knew that, for the first time in a long while, someone else's presence didn't feel like an obstacle.

And that unsettled me more than I wanted to admit.

Chapter 2 - The Boundaries of Trust

Borys really did arrive eight minutes before nine.

He stood outside the gallery holding two paper cups, with a folder tucked beneath his arm. Unlike the previous evening, his jacket was dry, his hair neatly arranged, and he wore the expression of a man who had already dealt with several matters before the rest of the city had finished its first coffee.

"Double espresso," he said, handing me a cup. "No sugar."

"Did you check to make sure it hasn't been poisoned?"

"I figured someone with your personality doesn't need any additional dangers."

I fixed my gaze on him.

"Was that supposed to be funny?"

"A little."

"You need to work on choosing your audience."

He smiled.

I was beginning to suspect that smile was his most dangerous skill. Not because it was particularly dazzling, but because it appeared so rarely and always at exactly the right moment.

We went into the gallery. Zofia hadn't arrived yet, so I had a few minutes to examine Borys's materials without the pressure of her expectations.

He placed the folder on the desk and took out three photocopies.

"A catalogue from the late seventies. A framing workshop on Jedności Narodowej Street. They produced distinctive mouldings with a deep groove along the inner edge."

I studied the reproduction.

"Similar."

"Very similar. But not identical."

"What's different?"

"The height of the profile and the way the corner is finished. Our frame has an additional layer of wood that isn't shown in the drawing."

"A later modification?"

"Possibly."

I put the copy down.

"So we still don't know when it was made."

"At least we know where to start."

For a moment, I watched him over the rim of my cup.

"Are you always this cautious?"

"Not always."

"When do you stop being cautious?"

Borys raised his eyes.

"When it comes to things that matter to me."

He didn't say it flirtatiously. That was precisely why, for a moment, I forgot what I'd intended to say.

The gallery door opened abruptly.

Zofia Maj entered with a phone pressed to her ear and a leather handbag hanging from her shoulder. She wore an elegant beige coat that probably cost more than a month's rent on the studio I dreamed of.

"Yes, I'll confirm after the meeting," she was saying into the phone. "Of course. Don't worry."

She ended the call and greeted us with a broad smile.

"How wonderful. You're already working."

"We're establishing what we still don't know," I replied.

"That sounds rather less wonderful."

"Depends on whether you're expecting the truth or a comforting answer."

Zofia took off her coat.

"Anita, don't start. I know you're thorough. That's why I hired you."

"Then I need time."

"How much?"

"However long it takes to verify the discrepancies. For now, I suggest ten working days for additional inquiries, after which we can decide whether further examination is necessary."

Zofia looked at Borys.

"And the frame?"

"I won't begin any restoration work until the documentation is complete," he replied.

The gallery owner sighed.

"Have you two already formed some kind of alliance?"

"We've agreed on working procedures," I said.

"That sounds even worse."

We sat at a small table in the gallery's back office. Zofia spread out a brochure prepared for potential buyers. The first page featured a photograph of the landscape, the name